


## Article

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Gillon, Leslie

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## Research Article

Les Gillon\*

# Varieties of Freedom in Music Improvisation

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**Abstract:** This article considers the freedom for the musician that exists within different kinds of music improvisation. It examines the constraints, conventions and parameters within which music improvisations are created and identifies three broad strands of improvisatory practice, that have developed in response to the development of recording technology. It argues that non-hierarchical, pan-ideomatic and structurally indeterminate forms of music improvisation that began to emerge in the late 20th century represent a form of music that models and expresses the felt freedom of the improvising musician.

**Keywords:** music improvisation, Jazz, composition, experimental music, sound recording, freedom, Dave Brubeck, Cream, Ornette Coleman, Keith Jarrett, The Necks, Can

The freedom afforded the improvising musician is often contrasted with the discipline demanded of the classical performer. As the pianist, Dave Brubeck put it, “Jazz stands for freedom. It’s supposed to be the voice of freedom: Get out there and improvise, and take chances, and don’t be a perfectionist—leave that to the classical musicians” (Duncan 1989). Although this characterisation of improvisation may tempt us to identify improvisation as an individualist activity, it is important to remember that improvisatory music is more often performed by an ensemble of improvising musicians, of which Brubeck’s own quartet was a typical example. In an ensemble, the freedom of the individual musician is not absolute. Group improvisation offers challenges to the musician and raises questions about what is meant by “freedom” within the context of collective music creation. As David Toop points out:

Improvised music plays out the conflict between the social and the solitary. Without highly developed individualistic techniques the music would absorb and nullify individual contributions, and yet the group bends the individual to its volition just as much as the individual bends the group. Even the wildest most forceful players must consider their responsibilities, their lack of freedom as human beings, social creatures, political animals.  
(Toop 174)

In order to take account of those political and social realities of group improvisation as practised in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to place that musical practice within its historical context and consider what notion of freedom means within different kinds of music improvisation.

Although in accounts of music created within the Western classical tradition, improvisation occupies only a minor footnote, it is nonetheless true that even though classical music performers typically do not engage in improvisation, for the composer some form of improvisatory practice is often part of the compositional process. That private and solitary use of improvisation within a compositional process stands in contrast to the practice of collective, publicly performed improvisational music that emerged within popular music traditions of the 20th Century.

Improvisation or extemporised composition must have been a central part of the early development of all forms of human music making. If it has been peripheral to the history of western music for most of the last millennium improvisation, it is perhaps partly because its ephemeral nature ill-equipped it to thrive

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\*Corresponding author: Les Gillon, School of Journalism, Media and Performance, E-mail: [lgillon@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:lgillon@uclan.ac.uk)

in cultural environments affected by the invention of a powerful new technique: the use of staff notation. The use of the written score enabled music to be recorded, preserved, published and reproduced and so enabled musicians to create work of ever greater scale, complexity and sophistication. The later invention of the printing press magnified the impact of staff notation and ensured that musicians and audiences increasingly had access to music created in distant times and distant places.

If the available technology for recording music—the written score—shaped the practice of music making up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also necessitated the creation of strict hierarchies within the production of music, the separation of the composer and the performer and a loss of autonomy for individual musicians. Within western classical art music, improvisation managed to persist up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in the form of cadenzas and preludes, but by the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century improvisation had been excluded from the concert hall. In orchestras that had grown larger, often with 70 or more members, hierarchical structures functioned to ensure the necessary performance discipline for large-scale complex works. Individual creativity on the part of orchestral players needed to be kept in check; the music was determined by the composer by means of the score, and a particular interpretation of that score was determined by the conductor. The musical training of performers equipped them with the skills to interpret and perform complex and technically challenging musical pieces, yet often left them unable to play music that had not been written by others.

It took the development of new technologies, audio recording, reproduction and broadcasting, to bring improvisation back from the margins. As had happened with the introduction of earlier technologies such as staff notation and the printed score, new technology radically changed the way music was made. With the invention of recording and broadcast technology, a form of music practice that had been ephemeral and located in a particular place became available across space and time: preserved for future generations to experience and available to a global listenership. The dominant western popular music styles of the twentieth century, jazz, blues and many genres of rock and pop music, all to a greater or lesser extent have used improvisation as a significant element. The availability of recording and broadcast technology meant that jazz and other forms of improvisatory popular music, as well as music from non-western improvisatory musical traditions, could be recorded, made accessible to a wide audience and preserved to be played and re-played. If jazz was one source of improvisational experimentation in twentieth-century popular music, another came from a growing awareness of non-western musical traditions. Ravi Shankar's appearances at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 and Woodstock in 1969 illustrates the influence of Indian classical music on rock music culture at that time. Musicians were exposed to an improvisatory tradition that does not have a fixed time-based structure, where instead structures emerge within an improvisation whose parameters are melodic modes and the combinations and extensions of rhythmic patterns and motifs.

Those conditions meant that through the 20<sup>th</sup> century a diverse range of improvisational practices developed, each of which had its own parameters: idioms and typical techniques. As improvisation developed within a range of different popular music traditions, most of Afro-American origin, the need to market this music within the new recording and broadcasting industries led to creation of genre labels, such as blues, jazz, gospel, rock and roll, which have then spawned sub-genres and fusions. Each of these genres, to a greater or lesser extent, features the use of ensemble playing that involves musicians improvising together within idioms characteristic of their particular genre. I have separated the different varieties of 21<sup>st</sup> Century improvisatory practice into three broad strands which I label, traditional, modernist and post-modernist improvisation.

## Traditional Improvisation

By traditional improvisation, I mean improvisation that takes place within a particular musical tradition. The development of recording and broadcast technology brought to the surface previously submerged improvisatory practice within European and African American folk traditions. The availability of recordings accelerated the synthesis of these traditions into an explosion of diverse forms of popular music that developed rapidly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of course, most genres of jazz, blues and gospel music feature elements of vocal improvisation, but it is within the instrumental break, the “solo” that improvisation is most usually considered. Those improvisations typically conform to the conventions of the particular genre within which they are located.

For example, if we look at the characteristics of gypsy jazz, we see that improvisation takes place within pre-set structures in the form of popular songs and original compositions. It has typical forms of phrasing and favours particular forms of melodic and harmonic invention: for instance, fast chromatic runs, the use of whole tone and diminished scales. Now gypsy jazz shares many of these features with other forms of jazz (be-bop springs to mind), but the musical idioms are precisely enough defined to make the differences instantly identifiable to anyone familiar with those different branches of the jazz family tree. The musician wishing to play be-bop or gypsy jazz convincingly must respect the specific conventions of the genre.

The conventions that shape these genres are structural as well as stylistic. The freedom to improvise coherently within an ensemble is made possible by these conventional restraints on improvisational freedom. The live recording *At Carnegie Hall* (1963) by the Dave Brubeck Quartet illustrates the space the individual musicians make for each other within the pre-set arrangement. In “St. Louis Blues” for example, after the band plays the “head” where Brubeck’s piano makes a more or less straight statement of the melody of the jazz standard, the harmonic structure provides each of the four musicians, in turn, an opportunity to play an improvised solo. That is not to say that, as each soloist takes the lead, the three remaining musicians cease to improvise. On the contrary, all four musicians are improvising throughout the piece, but when in the role of supporting the soloist, they ensure that their improvised playing works collectively acts to carry and define the underlying rhythmic and harmonic structure. This pre-agreed structure places limits on the extent and range of improvisation within the piece but also guarantees that each musician will have the freedom to solo while being supported by other ensemble members.

Although traditional improvisation works within set conventions, that does not mean that genres cannot be extended, merged or subverted. Indeed, throughout the past century, those conventions have been in a continuous state of flux, development and redefinition. The fusions within late 1960s rock and pop music improvisatory practice provide many examples. Instrumental improvisation within late 20<sup>th</sup>-century rock and pop music emerged from the traditions of rhythm and blues, gospel and country music, and typically came in the form of an improvised or semi-improvised guitar, keyboard or saxophone solo featured within an otherwise tightly structured arrangement.

However, by the mid-1960s improvisation had begun to break out from its containment within these licenced 12 or 16 bar sections of pop and rock songs. The live performances of bands like Cream and the Grateful Dead featured extended improvisations in which not only the featured soloist but all members of the group were involved in the practice of improvisation and the possibility of stretching or even breaking out of pre-set structures emerged.

While Cream’s guitarist Eric Clapton was steeped in the blues tradition, the other two members of the band, bassist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker, had previously played with jazz ensembles. Underlining that fusion between the genres of blues and jazz Jack Bruce compared the approach of Cream to that of Ornette Coleman whose work I will discuss later: “Thinking back on that band, it was really a jazz band, there was so much improvising by the time it evolved. We started off playing four- or five- minute tunes, but by the time we got to San Francisco in ‘67, it had started to stretch out. It became almost like an Ornette Coleman band, with Eric not knowing he was Ornette Coleman, Ginger and me not telling him” (Smith).

Eric Clapton was known for his blues-based guitar solos, working mainly within standard 12 bar and structures in which the rhythm section supported the solo with relatively little improvisational playing when compared with a jazz ensemble such as the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Clapton’s featured guitar solos for example within the John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers band, were underscored by simple repeated grooves that clearly spelt out the harmonic and rhythmic structure supporting the soloist and were typically contained within a few cycles of a 12-bar blues. In Cream by contrast he had the opportunity to improvise more freely and at an extended length. These long improvisations were the band’s principal attraction as a live act. Although they were also successful in terms of record sales, studio recordings were not able to capture this central feature of the band’s appeal. In order to overcome this disparity between Cream’s live performances

and their studio recordings, in 1968 the band released their third album, *Wheels of Fire* in the form of a double vinyl LP with one disc of studio recordings and one disc of live concert recordings. The album was commercially successful, reaching number 1 in the Billboard Album Chart despite a lukewarm review from Jann S. Wenner in Rolling Stone magazine, which heavily criticised the album's production, Jack Bruce's singing and quality of the songwriting.

However, although Wenner was largely dismissive of the studio recordings he praised the live recordings. He wrote "This is the kind of thing that people who have seen Cream perform walk away raving about and it's good to at last have it on a record," while singling out the live version of the Robert Johnson blues song "Crossroads" as the best track on the album saying "the tune is Clapton's showpiece, and he does it just like he's supposed to" (Wenner). The guitar solos on that recording of Crossroads, particularly the second solo, have regularly been voted as favourites by rock music fans. *The Daily Telegraph's* chief pop and rock music critic rated it as the best guitar solo of Clapton's recording career (McCormick).

However, Clapton's own opinion of the second solo on "Crossroads" from *Wheels of Fire* differs from the popular and critical view:

I really don't like it. I think there's something wrong with it. I wouldn't be at all surprised if we weren't lost at that point in the song, because that used to happen a lot. I'd forget where the "one" was, and I'd be playing the one on beat four or beat two. Somehow, it would make this crazy new hybrid thing which I never liked, because that's not what it was supposed to be. (Fox 42)

Clapton's vocal immediately after the end of the second solo supports this interpretation, as he slightly misjudges the timing of the opening words. It is interesting that this point captured in live performance, in which the intense improvisatory invention of Bruce and Baker had momentarily thrown Clapton out of the comfortable pocket of his traditional 12 bar structure, is identified as a high point in his career as an improvising guitarist. But for Clapton, the breaking of the norms of the supportive rock and blues rhythm section to some extent transgressed the rules of the expected relationship of trust between the musicians and this clearly was a factor in making Cream's career a brief one.

We should not be entirely swayed by Bruce's characterisation of Cream as a jazz trio. As Allan F. Moore points out, "On almost all the solos on Cream's *Wheels of Fire*, both bass and rhythm guitar maintain the song's harmonic patterns, restricting the pitches available to the lead guitar at all times" (Moore 2001 p84). This is true even of the live recordings; although Bruce colours and stretches the tonality at times, and he and Baker break up the standard 4/4 beat, crossing bar lines and overlaying more complex rhythmic motifs, they nonetheless adhere strictly to the repeated 12-bar harmonic structure of the song.

## Modernist Improvisation

In citing Ornette Coleman as an influence, Jack Bruce pointed to a recent development in jazz that I would identify as belonging to my second strand of improvisatory approaches, the modernist strand. In the latter half of the twentieth-century forms of improvisatory music-making emerged that rejected the idioms, structures and parameters of all of these traditions of improvisation and defined itself as "free" improvisation. When Coleman's album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* was released in 1961, the original album sleeve art featured *White Light* (1954), a painting by the New York Abstract Expressionist artist Jackson Pollock. The album artwork underlined the parallel between what Coleman was calling "free jazz," with its refusal to accept conventional parameters of tonality, harmony, melody and metre and the Abstract Expressionist rejection of figuration, linear perspective and conventional painting techniques. Both Abstract Expressionism and Free Jazz represented the rejection of tradition.

But in neither case did this imply the absence of conventions. Abstract Expressionist artists the forging of new conventions to with scale, shallow depth, flatness and abstraction. Those conventions can be heard being laid down on Coleman's 1961 album with its polyrhythms, metric shifts and fluid or ambiguous tonalities, but some older conventions were also retained; each of the band takes an individual solo in turn, and while the opening bass clarinet solo by Eric Dolphy veers into the atonal,

Coleman's own solo follows recognisable, even familiar melodic patterns, albeit without a fixed tonal centre.

Stephen Rush's analysis of "Peace Warriors" from Coleman's 1987 album *In All Languages* illustrates the necessity for musicians to conform to the new conventions of Free Jazz. He notes the refusal of bass player Charlie Hayden to provide a harmonic resolution to a musical phrase of Coleman's:

Surely Haden heard the reference to C major in Coleman's improvisation, and just as surely, he chose to not play the obvious or appropriate tonal solutions. One could say that if he were to play the "right notes" (as in the roots of the chord), it would have been the wrong thing to play because this is Free Jazz. (Rush)

If Coleman's album retained some structural elements of traditional improvisation, the strand of jazz that took its name from his 1961 album was often more uncompromising. Groups like the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and AMM eschewed any regular pulse within their improvisations, embraced atonality and often explored extended instrumental techniques to produce noises unlike those expected in any conventional musical piece. Nevertheless, as Toop points out, "improvisation stripped of the structuring principles that make jazz or Indian ragas so instantly recognisable is not exclusively chaotic and anarchic, any more than music tied to those principles is necessarily formulaic" (Toop 2).

Electronic and electro-acoustic improvisations of the past few decades have taken this rejection of musical conventions still further, rejecting the limitations of musical instruments altogether and embracing the challenge of Luigi Russollo's Futurist manifesto, *The Art of Noises* (1913) and creating music from "non-musical" sounds.

Even within classical music, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist approaches open up a space for improvisation within contemporary and experimental music. For example, the open and graphic scores of John Cage and Cornelius Cardew, leave far more space for the musicians to define and create their own musical responses.

In 1964, Stockhausen began to tour extensively with a group of players and set out to compose works involving the electronic modification and accompaniment of music being played by instrumentalists. He called this music "intuitive", a term that suggests free improvisation, but it was not. His intuitive music was scored, albeit minimally or graphically in many cases, providing great freedom for the individual performers within the boundary lines established by the composer. (Holmes 134-5)

Although, as Holmes points out, the individual musicians were afforded much greater autonomy than is the norm for performers within a classical music context, the overall structure of the pieces were determined in advance by the composer's score. Moreover, Stockhausen's role in the performance was at the electronic mixing desk, processing, manipulating and shaping the improvised contributions of each player. In taking that role, he ensured that the final structure of the piece remained securely in the hands of its composer.

## Post-modernist Improvisation

The music I am classifying as Post-modernist Improvisation has three defining characteristics. The formal characteristics of the music represent freedom from the conventions of any one genre and freedom from the restrictions of pre-determined structure. The circumstances of production are typified by freedom from hierarchical organisational strategies and working practices. I am aware that not all music to which the label "post-modernist" has been attached would fall within my definition. DJ Spooky's *Optometry* (2002) album attracted the label postmodern jazz, because of the artist's willingness to combine free jazz improvisation with a diverse range of other musical and lyrical elements. The album made use of William Parker, Mathew Shipp, Guillermo E. Brown, and Joe McPhee, whose free jazz improvisations formed the raw material for DJ Spooky to then remix, manipulate and combine with other recordings. Though the playing of Parker, Shipp and Brown was free of any pre-determined structure, the final product was determined shaped by DJ Spooky whose privileged role as producer firmly established him as the author of the work. This approach echoes that of Stockhausen, in establishing structural discipline through the

engineering of the sound by a single producer and in doing so establishing and preserving the creative hierarchy within the ensemble.

In his critique of post-modernist art Fredric Jameson identified Abstract Expressionism as part of ‘the final, extraordinary flowering of a high-modernist impulse’, but he makes it clear that the cultural retreat from, or rejection of, modernism that emerged in the 1960s was not confined to the visual arts and architecture:

The enumeration of what follows, then, at once becomes empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous: Andy Warhol and pop art, but also photorealism, and beyond it, the “new expressionism”; the moment, in music, of John Cage, but also the synthesis of classical and “popular” styles found in composers like Phil Glass and Terry Riley, and also punk and new wave rock. (Jameson 8)

Jameson identifies eclecticism as a key element of post-modernist art, and while I question the inclusion of punk rock in this category, he is right to point to the willingness of classical composers like Riley and Glass to draw from popular and non-western musical traditions, both in form and technique. However, as Jameson points out, these new musical approaches were heterogeneous; approaches to improvisation certainly varied widely. The examples of Glass and Riley illustrate two different tendencies within what has been called of post-modernist music, that I wish to tease out in this discussion. Improvisation is not a feature of the work of Glass, who draws from popular music (as in his *“Low” Symphony* of 1993, which was based on music by David Bowie and Brian Eno), but then rigorously structures his compositions using traditional orchestral scores. I do not dispute that Glass belongs in the category of postmodernism; his rejection of atonal and serialist compositional techniques indicates that and the eclectic and pan-ideomatic nature of his sources confirm it.

However, Terry Riley, by contrast, opened up areas of indeterminacy in his scores that extended to the performer, not only the freedom to improvise within a structure, but also to collectively shape the structure itself. His composition *In C* (1954) presents the players with a set of music phrases of varying lengths that the player may select from, play repeatedly, or once, and at any tempo. As a result, even the duration of the piece is not determined in advance. That structural indeterminacy is a defining feature of the emergent form of music that I have labelled Postmodernist Improvisation, and I will look at three examples of musical projects that I identify as falling into this category; the solo concerts of Keith Jarrett, the German rock band Can and the Australian jazz trio The Necks. The work of all three certainly characterised by a willingness to draw upon the totality of music available to the musician, regardless of genre and irrespective of tradition, but beyond that, there is an insistence that improvisation implies unrestricted freedom of form, a disdain for prepared material and a determination to escape from predetermined structures. But their work also opens up questions about what we mean by “unrestricted freedom” in the context of instant composition.

As we have noted, the invention of sound recording technology led to a great expansion of music improvisational practice within music, and to an explosion of genres and sub-genres. But the availability of sound recording technology also has another direct benefit for the improvising musician, in that it provides a powerful tool for reflective practice. With access to recordings of their own improvisatory practice musicians have a tool to study the creative processes at work in in the moment of instant composition.

Consider this interview with Keith Jarrett in which he is asked why he chose to play a certain Am chord to begin a piece on his album *Rio* (2011), a recording of a solo concert in Brazil. At first, Jarrett says that he does not know why he began with that particular chord, then recalls that as the piece was an encore, he felt he needed to “settle” the audience back in their seats after prolonged applause and that he chose the direct statement of a simple triad, for that reason. He then begins to elaborate on the non-verbal improvisational decision making involved in the improvisation process:

I also wanted to pay homage to where I was. I found it much easier to play pure voicings—meaning triadic things—because Brazilian music often involves that kind of sound. The singers I’ve heard there, and the chord movement or lack of movement is still pure. And it’s somewhere inside of me, too, because rhythm is rhythm, and a minor chord is a minor chord. But at a certain moment, that minor chord is definitely what you should play. In another situation, you might think, “I’m locking myself in a closed room by playing an A minor chord.” If I was in Germany and I had taken an intermission and come back, I don’t think I would—you know, the Sturm und Drang thing—I’m not into that, so I would have avoided

the A minor chord. The circumstances, the environment, the instrument, and my awareness of all these things you said we don't think of enough—I was just being led. I often think I'm literally asking myself, "Okay, what comes next?" The audience quiets down, and then I throw them an arpeggiated A minor. And right away, the room's different. Everything's different around me, and I'm the one in charge, so I have to know, "Okay, why did I play that?" And then, "How far away from that chord do I want to go?" And those are things I'm certainly not thinking in words. It's way, way faster than that. (Regen)

Jarrett's account of this one choice of musical gesture is illuminating, indicating attention to the precise circumstances of the moment, including room, audience, cultural and geographical location, music history, all acting upon him in a non-verbal process. This heightened awareness is recollected when listening to the recording, but the recollection verbalises considerations that were unconscious at the time; significantly, at one point he talks about "just being led."

Jarrett's accounts of the subjective experience of improvising are similar to descriptions of states of mindfulness and meditation, in their reports of "loss of self" and of a sense of being in the moment. The description of losing oneself in improvisation is one that is a commonplace expression offered by improvising musicians and has been the subject of research within psychology. MacDonald and Wilson (2006) interviewed musicians about the experience of improvisation and found that they reported deindividuation, or a loss of sense of self while being part of a larger whole that might encompass the group or the group and the audience.

They also described improvisation as involving no sense of effort, an absence of thinking, instead of relying on "feelings" and a focus on the present, being no longer aware of past or future. These subjective mental states are lent external validation by neuroscientific research that shows that when a musician is improvising the activity of the self-monitoring part of the brain is greatly reduced. Limb and Braun (2008) scanned the brains of musicians while they were improvising and while playing rehearsed material and found that when musicians improvise there a pattern of dissociation in the prefrontal cortex: increased activity in the medial part of this brain region and reduced activity in lateral areas. The medial prefrontal cortex is associated with "internally motivated behaviour" and "autobiographical narrative," while lateral areas are thought to be involved in monitoring, judging, and correcting behaviour.

Keith Jarrett's solo improvised piano concerts are both pan-ideomatic and open in structure and yet are not considered in any way avant-garde or extreme; indeed, a concert recording of one of these improvised performances, *The Köln Concert* (1975) has sold more copies than any other piano recording in any genre. The probable reason for the popularity of Jarrett's improvisatory practice when compared with the small audiences for free jazz and avant-garde improvisation is that while Jarrett certainly employs dissonance, his music is tonal, melodic and rhythmic in nature. Jarrett's solo concerts are acts of instant composition. His improvisational practice draws upon the totality of his musical experience, which encompasses his study of Debussy and Chopin as much as his work with Miles Davis and Art Blakey, but it also draws upon his own lived experience in the moment of performance.

Solo improvisation enables the musician to be completely free to structure the piece spontaneously and is easy to reconcile with the notion of "internally motivated behaviour". Structural openness is more difficult to achieve in an ensemble, particularly one that wishes, like Jarrett to work tonally and with the freedom to develop harmonic progressions, shift between keys, change rhythm and tempo and create larger scale structure within the music. Structure is decided in the moment; Jarrett talks about asking himself "Okay, what comes next?" As a solo player, he can answer that question without the risk of betraying the trust of other musicians, as might be the case in ensemble setting. It is those musicians who practice instant composition within ensembles for whom the musical problems posed by open or undefined structure are most challenging, but the exploration of solutions to those problems are the basis for an emergent musical form, collective instant composition, that raises questions about the nature of freedom in improvised music.

The Australian trio, The Necks is an ensemble that has attempted to reconcile freedom of improvisation with the structural demands of collective instant composition. Their performances contain no prepared material nor employ any pre-determined structural conventions. "There are no rules, no agreements ... about how the discourse will evolve." (Winston) As the band's bassist Lloyd Swanson points out, even the selection of live concert recordings raises issues of structure:



Recording our live performances brings up a whole raft of issues. When someone is listening to one of our improvisations unfolding in concert, they have in common with us the fact that it is impossible to fully keep track of what has happened so far, and when it happened. I think one of our most attractive attributes is that we can finish a live piece and everyone in the room, us included, can be asking themselves, “How on earth did we end up there?” No one, no matter how musically savvy, can instantly recall the sequence of events of a one-hour piece of music. But by freezing a piece of music in time, we are able to repeatedly listen to it and thus get more and more acquainted with sections of it that may have already disappeared from our memory by the end of the live performance. And with that comes a greater expectation of structural development. Many of our pieces may appear really great on an initial listen, but after getting really acquainted with them over several listens, we might start to think, “You know—two thirds of that one is great but I don’t think where it eventually goes to is so wonderful” or “That one gets into such a wonderful area but it takes so long to get there”, or countless variations of that sort of thing. So we can all become hypercritical. As we should, because we’re doing something quite perverse with these spontaneous performances—we’re freezing them in time and offering people the freedom to play them over and over again. (Swanton)

All improvisatory practice carries the risk of failure, and in collective group improvisation the risks are high, and the need for trust and common understanding (in a musical context if not necessarily on a personal level) are high. Fear of failure is not conducive to a state of mind in which a flattening of the self-monitoring systems of the brain can be achieved. It is not surprising that musicians involved in collective instant composition often develop strategies to contain that risk. Within recorded music risk is frequently managed through a process of editing and selection. This might be as simple as, in the case of Keith Jarrett, carefully choosing which recordings to release. In other cases, a more active studio-based techniques are used. The Necks also release studio albums, in the making of which they are happy to use the full resources of the recording studio in order to reshape their improvised music in post-production. Many critics have compared both their music and their method of productions to those of the German band, Can.

From its formation in 1968, Can performed and composed through group improvisation. Its members had backgrounds in experimental and atonal music, bassist Holger Csukay and keyboardist Irmin Schmitt having studied under Stockhausen and drummer Jaki Leibezeit having previously been part of a free jazz ensemble. They employed atonality and electronic noise in their work, but used it sparingly and placed it alongside more conventional tonal composition and repetitive rhythms. Collective instant composition was at the heart of their live performances but also of their song-writing and recording:

Already on their first album, Can worked with their concept of what Irmin Schmidt called “spontaneous or collective composition” (rather than “improvisation”), creating songs on the spot but giving them a clear structure and remixing them and adding overdubs later. Because the overall sound of the group was more important than its individual parts, Holger Csukay called Can an “orchestra” rather than a “band” and compared their musical approach to passing the ball in soccer. (Adelt 359)

The metaphor of “passing the ball” is an apt one, as musical motifs were picked up between one player and another, echoed and repeated. The metaphor also emphasises the collective and non-hierarchical nature of the band as a team. Their studio recordings do not privilege one instrument above another, even breaking the conventions of pop and rock production by mixing the vocals to sit amongst the other instruments, rather than rise above them. The band rarely took conventional solos, instead having extended instrumental sections in which all the instruments are fully engaged in improvisation. Their albums are examples of composition through edited improvisation; loosely structured improvisations are restructured after the fact in the studio control room rather than determining structure by means of pre-composed harmonic progressions or arrangements. However, although they share with DJ Spooky the approach of creating structure through the editing and mixing process, there was no divide between producer and player; they performed that creative act of shaping and structuring their work collectively.

## Freedom and Self in Improvised Music

Improvisation provides a powerful social and political metaphor: it presents the possibility of personal and creative self-expression in contrast to merely playing the part that one is given. The questions raised

in attempting to define “freedom” within music improvisation, are relevant not only to other creative disciplines but to wider social and political spheres and to the conduct of our everyday lives. We started by considering the freedom of the improvising musician, in contrast to musicians playing pre-determined material, but the development and diversity of improvisational music-making shows that the notion of “freedom” is not simple and clear-cut in that context. We conventionally consider freedom of action in terms of our ability to make conscious individual choices. Within classical capitalist economics, we are all considered as rational actors exercising conscious, freedom of choice. Politically, as ideal citizens we express our choices at the ballot box, having listened to speeches and debates, considered manifestos, weighed up opposing arguments and then freely chosen where to place our vote. The felt freedom of the improvising musician does not neatly fit within a concept of freedom that is based on making conscious individual choices.

If the freedom of the jazz musician has often been popularly depicted as hedonistic, or even antisocial individualism, the reality is different. The freedom of the musician is never absolute when playing in an improvisatory ensemble, or working within the conventions of a genre. Musical improvisation comes in many different forms, and each has its own particular freedoms, limitations and responsibilities. Far from being characterised by self-assertion and the exercise of conscious individual decision making, the *felt freedom* of the improvising musician is typically described as choice-less state in which there is a loss of self, an absorption into immediate act of making music and a heightened awareness of group needs. The emerging forms of collective instant composition that are non-hierarchical, pan-ideomatic and structurally indeterminate, represent perhaps the purest attempt to express that felt freedom in musical form.

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